NEW YEAR'S DAY

By Edith Wharton

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OLD NEW YORK

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(The 'Seventies)

By EDITH WHARTON

OLD NEW YORK

- The Old Maid
- New Year's Day
- False Dawn
- The Spark

THE GLIMPSES OF THE MOON

THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

SUMMER

THE REEF

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FRENCH WAYS AND THEIR MEANING

OLD NEW YORK

NEW YEAR'S DAY

(The 'Seventies)

BY

EDITH WHARTON

AUTHOR OF "THE AGE OF INNOCENCE," ETC.

DECORATIONS BY E. C. CASWELL

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NEW YEAR'S DAY

(*The 'Seventies*)

I

"SHE was *bad* . . . always. They used to meet at the Fifth Avenue Hotel," said my mother, as if the scene of the offence added to the guilt of the couple whose past she was revealing. Her spectacles slanted on her knitting, she dropped the words in a hiss that might have singed the snowy baby-blanket which engaged her indefatigable fingers. (It was typical of my mother to be always employed in benevolent actions while she uttered uncharitable words.)

"They used to meet at the Fifth Avenue Hotel"; how the precision of the phrase characterized my old New York! A generation later, people would have said, in reporting an affair such as Lizzie Hazeldean's with Henry Prest: "They met in hotels"—and today who but a few superannuated spinsters, still feeding on the venom secreted in their youth, would take any interest in the tracing of such topographies?

Life has become too telegraphic for curiosity to linger on any given point in a sentimental relation; as old Sillerton Jackson, in response to my mother, grumbled through his perfect "china set": "Fifth Avenue Hotel? They might meet in the middle of Fifth Avenue nowadays, for all that anybody cares."

But what a flood of light my mother's tart phrase had suddenly focussed on an

unremarked incident of my boyhood!

The Fifth Avenue Hotel . . . Mrs. Hazeldean and Henry Prest . . . the conjunction of these names had arrested her darting talk on a single point of my memory, as a search-light, suddenly checked in its gyrations, is held motionless while one notes each of the unnaturally sharp and lustrous images it picks out.

At the time I was a boy of twelve, at home from school for the holidays. My mother's mother, Grandmamma Parrett, still lived in the house in West Twenty-third Street which Grandpapa had built in his pioneering youth, in days when people shuddered at the perils of living north of Union Square—days that Grandmamma and my parents looked back to with a joking incredulity as the years passed and the new houses advanced steadily

Park-ward, outstripping the Thirtieth Streets, taking the Reservoir at a bound, and leaving us in what, in my school-days, was already a dullish back-water between Aristocracy to the south and Money to the north.

Even then fashion moved quickly in New York, and my infantile memory barely reached back to the time when Grandmamma, in lace lappets and creaking *"moiré,"* used to receive on New Year's day, supported by her handsome married daughters. As for old Sillerton Jackson, who, once a social custom had dropped into disuse, always affected never to have observed it, he stoutly maintained that the New Year's day ceremonial had never been taken seriously except among families of Dutch descent, and that that was why Mrs. Henry van der Luyden had clung to it, in a reluctant half-apologetic

way, long after her friends had closed their doors on the first of January, and the date had been chosen for those out-of-town parties which are so often used as a pretext for absence when the unfashionable are celebrating their rites.

Grandmamma, of course, no longer received. But it would have seemed to her an exceedingly odd thing to go out of town in winter, especially now that the New York houses were luxuriously warmed by the new hot-air furnaces, and searchingly illuminated by gas chandeliers. No, thank you—no country winters for the chilblained generation of prunella sandals and low-necked sarcenet, the generation brought up in unwarmed and unlit houses, and shipped off to die in Italy when they proved unequal to the struggle of living in New York! Therefore Grandmamma, like most of her con-

temporaries, remained in town on the first of January, and marked the day by a family reunion, a kind of supplementary Christmas—though to us juniors the absence of presents and plum-pudding made it but a pale and moonlike reflection of the Feast.

Still, the day was welcome as a lawful pretext for over-eating, dawdling, and looking out of the window: a Dutch habit still extensively practised in the best New York circles. On the day in question, however, we had not yet placed ourselves behind the plate-glass whence it would presently be so amusing to observe the funny gentlemen who trotted about, their evening ties hardly concealed behind their overcoat collars, darting in and out of chocolate-coloured house-fronts on their sacramental round of calls. We were still engaged in placidly digesting around the

ravaged luncheon table when a servant dashed in to say that the Fifth Avenue Hotel was on fire.

Oh, then the fun began—and what fun it was! For Grandmamma's house was just opposite the noble edifice of white marble which I associated with such deep-piled carpets, and such a rich sultry smell of anthracite and coffee, whenever I was bidden to "step across" for a messenger-boy, or to buy the evening paper for my elders.

The hotel, for all its sober state, was no longer fashionable. No one, in my memory, had ever known any one who went there; it was frequented by "politicians" and "Westerners," two classes of citizens whom my mother's intonation always seemed to deprive of their vote by ranking them with illiterates and criminals.

But for that very reason there was all

the more fun to be expected from the calamity in question; for had we not, with infinite amusement, watched the arrival, that morning, of monumental "floral pieces" and towering frosted cakes for the New Year's day reception across the way? The event was a communal one. All the ladies who were the hotel's "guests" were to receive together in the densely lace-curtained and heavily chandeliered public parlours, and gentlemen with long hair, imperials and white gloves had been hastening since two o'clock to the scene of revelry. And now, thanks to the opportune conflagration, we were going to have the excitement not only of seeing the Fire Brigade in action (supreme joy of the New York youngster), but of witnessing the flight of the ladies and their visitors, staggering out through the smoke in gala array. The idea that the fire

might be dangerous did not mar these pleasing expectations. The house was solidly built; New York's invincible Brigade was already at the door, in a glare of polished brass, coruscating helmets and horses shining like table-silver; and my tall cousin Hubert Wesson, dashing across at the first alarm, had promptly returned to say that all risk was over, though the two lower floors were so full of smoke and water that the lodgers, in some confusion, were being transported to other hotels. How then could a small boy see in the event anything but an unlimited lark?

Our elders, once reassured, were of the same mind. As they stood behind us in the windows, looking over our heads, we heard chuckles of amusement mingled with ironic comment.

"Oh, my dear, look—here they all come!

The New Year ladies! Low neck and short sleeves in broad daylight, every one of them! Oh, and the fat one with the paper roses in her hair . . . they *are* paper, my dear . . . off the frosted cake, probably! Oh! Oh! Oh! *Oh!*"

Aunt Sabina Wesson was obliged to stuff her lace handkerchief between her lips, while her firm poplin-cased figure rocked with delight.

"Well, my dear," Grandmamma gently reminded her, "in my youth we wore low-necked dresses all day long and all the year round."

No one listened. My cousin Kate, who always imitated Aunt Sabina, was pinching my arm in an agony of mirth. "Look at them scuttling! The parlours must be full of smoke. Oh, but this one is still funnier; the one with the tall feather in her hair! Granny, did you wear feathers

in your hair in the daytime? Oh, don't ask me to believe it! And the one with the diamond necklace! And all the gentlemen in white ties! Did Grandpapa wear a white tie at two o'clock in the afternoon?" Nothing was sacred to Kate, and she feigned not to notice Grandmamma's mild frown of reproval.

"Well, they do in Paris, to this day, at weddings—wear evening clothes and white ties," said Sillerton Jackson with authority. "When Minnie Transome of Charleston was married at the Madeleine to the Duc de . . ."

But no one listened even to Sillerton Jackson. One of the party had abruptly exclaimed: "Oh, there's a lady running out of the hotel who's not in evening dress!"

The exclamation caused all our eyes to turn toward the person indicated, who

had just reached the threshold; and someone added, in an odd voice: "Why, her figure looks like Lizzie Hazeldean's—"

A dead silence followed. The lady who was not in evening dress paused. Standing on the door-step with lifted veil, she faced our window. Her dress was dark and plain—almost conspicuously plain—and in less time than it takes to tell she had put her hand to her closely-patterned veil and pulled it down over her face. But my young eyes were keen and far-sighted; and in that hardly perceptible interval I had seen a vision. Was she beautiful—or was she only someone apart? I felt the shock of a small pale oval, dark eyebrows curved with one sure stroke, lips made for warmth, and now drawn up in a grimace of terror; and it seemed as if the mysterious something, rich, secret and insistent, that broods and murmurs be-

hind a boy's conscious thoughts, had suddenly peered out at me. . . As the dart reached me her veil dropped.

"But it *is* Lizzie Hazeldean!" Aunt Sabina gasped. She had stopped laughing, and her crumpled handkerchief fell to the carpet.

"Lizzie — *Lizzie?*" The name was echoed over my head with varying intonations of reprobation, dismay and half-veiled malice.

Lizzie Hazeldean? Running out of the Fifth Avenue Hotel on New Year's day with all those dressed-up women? But what on earth could she have been doing there? No; nonsense! It was impossible. . .

"There's Henry Prest with her," continued Aunt Sabina in a precipitate whisper.

"With her?" someone gasped; and

"Oh—" my mother cried with a shudder.

The men of the family said nothing, but I saw Hubert Wesson's face crimson with surprise. Henry Prest! Hubert was forever boring us youngsters with his Henry Prest! That was the kind of chap Hubert meant to be at thirty: in his eyes Henry Prest embodied all the manly graces. Married? No, thank you! That kind of man wasn't made for the domestic yoke. Too fond of ladies' society, Hubert hinted with his undergraduate smirk; and handsome, rich, independent—an all-round sportsman, good horseman, good shot, crack yachtsman (had his pilot's certificate, and always sailed his own sloop, whose cabin was full of racing trophies); gave the most delightful little dinners, never more than six, with cigars that beat old Beaufort's; was awfully decent to the younger men, chaps of Hubert's age in-

cluded—and combined, in short, all the qualities, mental and physical, which make up, in such eyes as Hubert's, that oracular and irresistible figure, the man of the world. "Just the fellow," Hubert always solemnly concluded, "that I should go straight to if ever I got into any kind of row that I didn't want the family to know about"; and our blood ran pleasantly cold at the idea of our old Hubert's ever being in such an unthinkable predicament.

I felt sorry to have missed a glimpse of this legendary figure; but my gaze had been enthralled by the lady, and now the couple had vanished in the crowd.

The group in our window continued to keep an embarrassed silence. They looked almost frightened; but what struck me even more deeply was that not one of them looked surprised. Even to my boy-

ish sense it was clear that what they had just seen was only the confirmation of something they had long been prepared for. At length one of my uncles emitted a whistle, was checked by a severe glance from his wife, and muttered: "I'll be damned"; another uncle began an unheeded narrative of a fire at which he had been present in his youth, and my mother said to me severely: "You ought to be at home preparing your lessons—a big boy like you!"—a remark so obviously unfair that it served only to give the measure of her agitation.

"I don't believe it," said Grandmamma, in a low voice of warning, protest and appeal. I saw Hubert steal a grateful look at her.

But nobody else listened: every eye still strained through the window. Livery-stable "hacks," of the old blue-curtained

variety, were driving up to carry off the fair fugitives; for the day was bitterly cold, and lit by one of those harsh New York suns of which every ray seems an icicle. Into these ancient vehicles the ladies, now regaining their composure, were being piled with their removable possessions, while their kid-gloved callers ("So like the White Rabbit!" Kate exulted) appeared and reappeared in the doorway, gallantly staggering after them under bags, reticules, bird-cages, pet dogs and heaped-up finery. But to all this—as even I, a little boy, was aware—nobody in Grandmamma's window paid the slightest attention. The thoughts of one and all, with a mute and guarded eagerness, were still following the movements of those two who were so obviously unrelated to the rest. The whole business—discovery, comment, silent visual pursuit

—could hardly, all told, have filled a minute, perhaps not as much; before the sixty seconds were over, Mrs. Hazeldean and Henry Prest had been lost in the crowd, and, while the hotel continued to empty itself into the street, had gone their joint or separate ways. But in my grandmother's window the silence continued unbroken.

"Well, it's over: here are the firemen coming out again," someone said at length.

We youngsters were all alert at that; yet I felt that the grown-ups lent but a half-hearted attention to the splendid sight which was New York's only pageant: the piling of scarlet ladders on scarlet carts, the leaping up on the engine of the helmeted flame-fighters, and the disciplined plunge forward of each pair of broad-

chested black steeds, as one after another the chariots of fire rattled off.

Silently, almost morosely, we withdrew to the drawing-room hearth; where, after an interval of languid monosyllables, my mother, rising first, slipped her knitting into its bag, and turning on me with renewed severity, said: "This racing after fire-engines is what makes you too sleepy to prepare your lessons"—a comment so wide of the mark that once again I perceived, without understanding, the extent of the havoc wrought in her mind by the sight of Mrs. Hazeldean and Henry Prest coming out of the Fifth Avenue Hotel together.

It was not until many years later that chance enabled me to relate this fugitive impression to what had preceded and what came after it.

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II

MRS. HAZELDEAN paused at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Madison Square. The crowd attracted by the fire still enveloped her; it was safe to halt and take breath.

Her companion, she knew, had gone in the opposite direction. Their movements, on such occasions, were as well-ordered and as promptly executed as those of the New York Fire Brigade; and after their precipitate descent to the hall, the discovery that the police had barred their usual exit, and the quick: "You're all right?" to which her imperceptible nod had responded, she was sure he had turned down

Twenty-third Street toward Sixth Avenue.

"The Parretts' windows were full of people," was her first thought.

She dwelt on it a moment, and then reflected: "Yes, but in all that crowd and excitement nobody would have been thinking of *me!*"

Instinctively she put her hand to her veil, as though recalling that her features had been exposed when she ran out, and unable to remember whether she had covered them in time or not.

"What a fool I am! It can't have been off my face for more than a second—" but immediately afterward another disquieting possibility assailed her. "I'm almost sure I saw Sillerton Jackson's head in one of the windows, just behind Sabina Wesson's. No one else has that particularly silvery gray hair." She shivered, for

everyone in New York knew that Sillerton Jackson saw everything, and could piece together seemingly unrelated fragments of fact with the art of a skilled china-mender.

Meanwhile, after sending through her veil the circular glance which she always shot about her at that particular corner, she had begun to walk up Broadway. She walked well—fast, but not too fast; easily, assuredly, with the air of a woman who knows that she has a good figure, and expects rather than fears to be identified by it. But under this external appearance of ease she was covered with cold beads of sweat.

Broadway, as usual at that hour, and on a holiday, was nearly deserted; the promenading public still slowly poured up and down Fifth Avenue.

"Luckily there was such a crowd when

we came out of the hotel that no one could possibly have noticed me," she murmured over again, reassured by the sense of having the long thoroughfare to herself. Composure and presence of mind were so necessary to a woman in her situation that they had become almost a second nature to her, and in a few minutes her thick uneven heart-beats began to subside and to grow steadier. As if to test their regularity, she paused before a florist's window, and looked appreciatively at the jars of roses and forced lilac, the compact bunches of lilies-of-the-valley and violets, the first pots of close-budded azaleas. Finally she opened the shop-door, and after examining the Jacqueminots and Marshal Niels, selected with care two perfect specimens of a new silvery-pink rose, waited for the florist to wrap them in cotton-wool, and

slipped their long stems into her muff for more complete protection.

"It's so simple, after all," she said to herself as she walked on. "I'll tell him that as I was coming up Fifth Avenue from Cousin Cecilia's I heard the fire-engines turning into Twenty-third Street, and ran after them. Just what *he* would have done . . . once . . ." she ended on a sigh.

At Thirty-first Street she turned the corner with a quicker step. The house she was approaching was low and narrow; but the Christmas holly glistening between frilled curtains, the well-scrubbed steps, the shining bell and door-knob, gave it a welcoming look. From garret to basement it beamed like the abode of a happy couple.

As Lizzie Hazeldean reached the door a curious change came over her. She was

conscious of it at once—she had so often said to herself, when her little house rose before her: "It makes me feel younger as soon as I turn the corner." And it was true even today. In spite of her agitation she was aware that the lines between her eyebrows were smoothing themselves out, and that a kind of inner lightness was replacing the heavy tumult of her breast. The lightness revealed itself in her movements, which grew as quick as a girl's as she ran up the steps. She rang twice—it was her signal—and turned an unclouded smile on her elderly parlourmaid.

"Is Mr. Hazeldean in the library, Susan? I hope you've kept up the fire for him."

"Oh, yes, ma'am. But Mr. Hazeldean's not in," said Susan, returning the smile respectfully.

"*Not in?* With his cold—and in this weather?"

"That's what I told him, ma'am. But he just laughed—"

"Just laughed? What do you mean, Susan?" Lizzie Hazeldean felt herself turning pale. She rested her hand quickly on the hall table.

"Well, ma'am, the minute he heard the fire-engine, off he rushed like a boy. It seems the Fifth Avenue Hotel's on fire: there's where he's gone."

The blood left Mrs. Hazeldean's lips; she felt it shuddering back to her heart. But a second later she spoke in a tone of natural and good-humoured impatience.

"What madness! How long ago—can you remember?" Instantly, she felt the possible imprudence of the question, and added: "The doctor said he ought not to be out more than a quarter of an hour,

and only at the sunniest time of the day."

"I know that, ma'am, and so I reminded him. But he's been gone nearly an hour, I should say."

A sense of deep fatigue overwhelmed Mrs. Hazeldean. She felt as if she had walked for miles against an icy gale: her breath came laboriously.

"How could you let him go?" she wailed; then, as the parlourmaid again smiled respectfully, she added: "Oh, I know—sometimes one can't stop him. He gets so restless, being shut up with these long colds."

"That's what I *do* feel, ma'am."

Mistress and maid exchanged a glance of sympathy, and Susan felt herself emboldened to suggest: "Perhaps the outing will do him good," with the tendency of her class to encourage favoured invalids in disobedience.

Mrs. Hazeldean's look grew severe. "Susan! I've often warned you against talking to him in that way—"

Susan reddened, and assumed a pained expression. "How can you think it, ma'am?—me that never say anything to anybody, as all in the house will bear witness."

Her mistress made an impatient movement. "Oh, well, I daresay he won't be long. The fire's over."

"Ah—you knew of it too, then, ma'am?"

"Of the fire? Why, of course. I *saw* it, even—" Mrs. Hazeldean smiled. "I was walking home from Washington Square—from Miss Cecilia Winter's—and at the corner of Twenty-third Street there was a huge crowd, and clouds of smoke. . . It's very odd that I shouldn't have run across Mr. Hazeldean." She looked limpidly at the parlourmaid.

"But, then, of course, in all that crowd and confusion . . ."

Half-way up the stairs she turned to call back: "Make up a good fire in the library, please, and bring the tea up. It's too cold in the drawing-room."

The library was on the upper landing. She went in, drew the two roses from her muff, tenderly unswathed them, and put them in a slim glass on her husband's writing-table. In the doorway she paused to smile at this touch of summer in the firelit wintry room; but a moment later her frown of anxiety reappeared. She stood listening intently for the sound of a latch-key; then, hearing nothing, passed on to her bedroom.

It was a rosy room, hung with one of the new English chintzes, which also covered the deep sofa, and the bed with its rose-lined pillow-covers. The carpet was

cherry red, the toilet-table ruffled and looped like a ball-dress. Ah, how she and Susan had ripped and sewn and hammered, and pieced together old scraps of lace and ribbon and muslin, in the making of that airy monument! For weeks after she had done over the room her husband never came into it without saying: "I can't think how you managed to squeeze all this loveliness out of that last cheque of your stepmother's."

On the dressing-table Lizzie Hazeldean noticed a long florist's box, one end of which had been cut open to give space to the still longer stems of a bunch of roses. She snipped the string, and extracted from the box an envelope which she flung into the fire without so much as a glance at its contents. Then she pushed the flowers aside, and after rearranging her dark hair before the mirror, carefully dressed

herself in a loose garment of velvet and lace which lay awaiting her on the sofa, beside her high-heeled slippers and stockings of open-work silk.

She had been one of the first women in New York to have tea every afternoon at five, and to put off her walking-dress for a tea-gown.

III

SHE returned to the library, where the fire was beginning to send a bright blaze through the twilight. It flashed on the bindings of Hazeldean's many books, and she smiled absently at the welcome it held out. A latch-key rattled, and she heard her husband's step, and the sound of his cough below in the hall.

"What madness—what madness!" she murmured.

Slowly—how slowly for a young man! —he mounted the stairs, and still coughing came into the library. She ran to him and took him in her arms.

"Charlie! How could you? In this weather? It's nearly dark!"

His long thin face lit up with a deprecating smile. "I suppose Susan's betrayed me, eh? Don't be cross. You've missed such a show! The Fifth Avenue Hotel's been on fire."

"Yes; I know." She paused, just perceptibly. "I *didn't* miss it, though—I rushed across Madison Square for a look at it myself."

"You did? You were there too? What fun!" The idea appeared to fill him with boyish amusement.

"Naturally I was! On my way home from Cousin Cecilia's . . .'

"Ah, of course. I'd forgotten you were going there. But how odd, then, that we didn't meet!"

"If we *had* I should have dragged you home long ago. I've been in at least half

an hour, and the fire was already over when I got there. What a baby you are to have stayed out so long, staring at smoke and a fire-engine!"

He smiled, still holding her, and passing his gaunt hand softly and wistfully over her head. "Oh, don't worry. I've been indoors, safely sheltered, and drinking old Mrs. Parrett's punch. The old lady saw me from her window, and sent one of the Wesson boys across the street to fetch me in. They had just finished a family luncheon. And Sillerton Jackson, who was there, drove me home. So you see,—"

He released her, and moved toward the fire, and she stood motionless, staring blindly ahead, while the thoughts spun through her mind like a mill-race.

"Sillerton Jackson—" she echoed, without in the least knowing what she said.

"Yes; he has the gout again—luckily for me!—and his sister's brougham came to the Parretts' to fetch him."

She collected herself. "You're coughing more than you did yesterday," she accused him.

"Oh, well—the air's sharpish. But I shall be all right presently. . . Oh, those roses!" He paused in admiration before his writing-table.

Her face glowed with a reflected pleasure, though all the while the names he had pronounced—"The Parretts, the Wessons, Sillerton Jackson"—were clanging through her brain like a death-knell.

"They *are* lovely, aren't they?" she beamed.

"Much too lovely for me. You must take them down to the drawing-room."

"No; we're going to have tea up here."

"That's jolly—it means there'll be no visitors, I hope?"

She nodded, smiling.

"Good! But the roses—no, they mustn't be wasted on this desert air. You'll wear them in your dress this evening?"

She started perceptibly, and moved slowly back toward the hearth.

"This evening? . . . Oh, I'm not going to Mrs. Struthers's," she said, remembering.

"Yes, you are. Dearest—I want you to!"

"But what shall you do alone all the evening? With that cough, you won't go to sleep till late."

"Well, if I don't, I've a lot of new books to keep me busy."

"Oh, your books—!" She made a little gesture, half teasing, half impatient, in the

direction of the freshly cut volumes stacked up beside his student lamp. It was an old joke between them that she had never been able to believe anyone could really "care for reading." Long as she and her husband had lived together, this passion of his remained for her as much of a mystery as on the day when she had first surprised him, mute and absorbed, over what the people she had always lived with would have called "a deep book." It was her first encounter with a born reader; or at least, the few she had known had been, like her stepmother, the retired opera-singer, feverish devourers of circulating library fiction: she had never before lived in a house with books in it. Gradually she had learned to take a pride in Hazeldean's reading, as if it had been some rare accomplishment; she had perceived that it reflected credit on him, and

was even conscious of its adding to the charm of his talk, a charm she had always felt without being able to define it. But still, in her heart of hearts she regarded books as a mere expedient, and felt sure that they were only an aid to patience, like jackstraws or a game of patience, with the disadvantage of requiring a greater mental effort.

"Shan't you be too tired to read to-night?" she questioned wistfully.

"Too tired? Why, you goose, reading is the greatest rest in the world!—I want you to go to Mrs. Struthers's, dear; I want to see you again in that black velvet dress," he added with his coaxing smile.

The parlourmaid brought in the tray, and Mrs. Hazeldean busied herself with the tea-caddy. Her husband had stretched himself out in the deep armchair which was his habitual seat. He crossed his arms

behind his neck, leaning his head back wearily against them, so that, as she glanced at him across the hearth, she saw the salient muscles in his long neck, and the premature wrinkles about his ears and chin. The lower part of his face was singularly ravaged; only the eyes, those quiet ironic grey eyes, and the white forehead above them, reminded her of what he had been seven years before. Only seven years!

She felt a rush of tears: no, there were times when fate was too cruel, the future too horrible to contemplate, and the past —the past, oh, how much worse! And there he sat, coughing, coughing—and thinking God knows what, behind those quiet half-closed lids. At such times he grew so mysteriously remote that she felt lonelier than when he was not in the room.

"Charlie!"

He roused himself. "Yes?"

"Here's your tea."

He took it from her in silence, and she began, nervously, to wonder why he was not talking. Was it because he was afraid it might make him cough again, afraid she would be worried, and scold him? Or was it because he was thinking—thinking of things he had heard at old Mrs. Parrett's, or on the drive home with Sillerton Jackson . . . hints they might have dropped . . . insinuations . . . she didn't know what . . . or of something he had *seen,* perhaps, from old Mrs. Parrett's window? She looked across at his white forehead, so smooth and impenetrable in the lamplight, and thought: "Oh, God, it's like a locked door. I shall dash my brains out against it some day!"

For, after all, it was not impossible that he had actually seen her, seen her from

Mrs. Parrett's window, or even from the crowd around the door of the hotel. For all she knew, he might have been near enough, in that crowd, to put out his hand and touch her. And he might have held back, benumbed, aghast, not believing his own eyes. . . She couldn't tell. She had never yet made up her mind how he would look, how he would behave, what he would say, if ever he *did* see or hear anything. . .

No! That was the worst of it. They had lived together for nearly nine years —and how closely!—and nothing that she knew of him, or had observed in him, enabled her to forecast exactly what, in that particular case, his state of mind and his attitude would be. In his profession, she knew, he was celebrated for his shrewdness and insight; in personal matters he

often seemed, to her alert mind, oddly absent-minded and indifferent. Yet that might be merely his instinctive way of saving his strength for things he considered more important. There were times when she was sure he was quite deliberate and self-controlled enough to feel in one way and behave in another: perhaps even to have thought out a course in advance—just as, at the first bad symptoms of illness, he had calmly made his will, and planned everything about her future, the house and the servants. . . No, she couldn't tell; there always hung over her the thin glittering menace of a danger she could neither define nor localize—like that avenging lightning which groped for the lovers in the horrible poem he had once read aloud to her (what a choice!) on a lazy afternoon of their wedding journey,

as they lay stretched under Italian stone-pines.

The maid came in to draw the curtains and light the lamps. The fire glowed, the scent of the roses drifted on the warm air, and the clock ticked out the minutes, and softly struck a half hour, while Mrs. Hazeldean continued to ask herself, as she so often had before: "Now, what would be the *natural* thing for me to say?"

And suddenly the words escaped from her, she didn't know how: "I wonder you didn't see me coming out of the hotel—for I actually squeezed my way in."

Her husband made no answer. Her heart jumped convulsively; then she lifted her eyes and saw that he was asleep. How placid his face looked—years younger than when he was awake! The immensity of her relief rushed over her in a warm glow, the counterpart of the icy sweat

which had sent her chattering homeward from the fire. After all, if he could fall asleep, fall into such a peaceful sleep as that—tired, no doubt, by his imprudent walk, and the exposure to the cold—it meant, beyond all doubt, beyond all conceivable dread, that he knew nothing, had seen nothing, suspected nothing: that she was safe, safe, safe!

The violence of the reaction made her long to spring to her feet and move about the room. She saw a crooked picture that she wanted to straighten, she would have liked to give the roses another tilt in their glass. But there he sat, quietly sleeping, and the long habit of vigilance made her respect his rest, watching over it as patiently as if it had been a sick child's.

She drew a contented breath. Now she could afford to think of his outing only as it might affect his health; and she knew

that this sudden drowsiness, even if it were a sign of extreme fatigue, was also the natural restorative for that fatigue. She continued to sit behind the tea-tray, her hands folded, her eyes on his face, while the peace of the scene entered into her, and held her under brooding wings.

IV

AT Mrs. Struthers's, at eleven o'clock that evening, the long over-lit drawing-rooms were already thronged with people.

Lizzie Hazeldean paused on the threshold and looked about her. The habit of pausing to get her bearings, of sending a circular glance around any assemblage of people, any drawing-room, concert-hall or theatre that she entered, had become so instinctive that she would have been surprised had anyone pointed out to her the unobservant expression and careless movements of the young women of her acquaintance, who also looked about them,

it is true, but with the vague unseeing stare of youth, and of beauty conscious only of itself.

Lizzie Hazeldean had long since come to regard most women of her age as children in the art of life. Some savage instinct of self-defence, fostered by experience, had always made her more alert and perceiving than the charming creatures who passed from the nursery to marriage as if lifted from one rose-lined cradle into another. "Rocked to sleep—that's what they've always been," she used to think sometimes, listening to their innocuous talk during the long after-dinners in hot drawing-rooms, while their husbands, in the smoking-rooms below, exchanged ideas which, if no more striking, were at least based on more direct experiences.

But then, as all the old ladies said, Liz-

zie Hazeldean had always preferred the society of men.

The man she now sought was not visible, and she gave a little sigh of ease. "If only he has had the sense to stay away!" she thought.

She would have preferred to stay away herself; but it had been her husband's whim that she should come. "You know you always enjoy yourself at Mrs. Struthers's—everybody does. The old girl somehow manages to have the most amusing house in New York. Who is it who's going to sing tonight? . . . If you don't go, I shall know it's because I've coughed two or three times oftener than usual, and you're worrying about me. My dear girl, it will take more than the Fifth Avenue Hotel fire to kill *me*. . . My heart's feeling unusually steady. . . Put on your black velvet, will you?—with these two roses. . ."

So she had gone. And here she was, in her black velvet, under the glitter of Mrs. Struthers's chandeliers, amid all the youth and good looks and gaiety of New York; for, as Hazeldean said, Mrs. Struthers's house was more amusing than anybody else's, and whenever she opened her doors the world flocked through them.

As Mrs. Hazeldean reached the inner drawing-room the last notes of a rich tenor were falling on the attentive silence. She saw Campanini's low-necked throat subside into silence above the piano, and the clapping of many tightly-fitting gloves was succeeded by a general movement, and the usual irrepressible outburst of talk.

In the breaking-up of groups she caught a glimpse of Sillerton Jackson's silvery crown. Their eyes met across bare shoulders, he bowed profoundly, and she fan-

cied that a dry smile lifted his moustache. "He doesn't usually bow to me as low as that," she thought apprehensively.

But as she advanced into the room her self-possession returned. Among all these stupid pretty women she had such a sense of power, of knowing almost everything better than they did, from the way of doing her hair to the art of keeping a secret! She felt a thrill of pride in the slope of her white shoulders above the black velvet, in the one curl escaping from her thick chignon, and the slant of the gold arrow tipped with diamonds which she had thrust in to retain it. And she had done it all without a maid, with no one cleverer than Susan to help her! Ah, as a woman she knew her business. . .

Mrs. Struthers, plumed and ponderous, with diamond stars studding her black

wig like a pin-cushion, had worked her resolute way back to the outer room. More people were coming in; and with her customary rough skill she was receiving, distributing, introducing them. Suddenly her smile deepened; she was evidently greeting an old friend. The group about her scattered, and Mrs. Hazeldean saw that, in her cordial absent-minded way, and while her wandering hostess-eye swept the rooms, she was saying a confidential word to a tall man whose hand she detained. They smiled at each other; then Mrs. Struthers's glance turned toward the inner room, and her smile seemed to say: "You'll find her there."

The tall man nodded. He looked about him composedly, and began to move toward the centre of the throng, speaking to everyone, appearing to have no object beyond that of greeting the next person

in his path, yet quietly, steadily pursuing that path, which led straight to the inner room.

Mrs. Hazeldean had found a seat near the piano. A good-looking youth, seated beside her, was telling her at considerable length what he was going to wear at the Beauforts' fancy-ball. She listened, approved, suggested; but her glance never left the advancing figure of the tall man.

Handsome? Yes, she said to herself; she had to admit that he was handsome. A trifle too broad and florid, perhaps; though his air and his attitude so plainly denied it that, on second thoughts, one agreed that a man of his height had, after all, to carry some ballast. Yes; his assurance made him, as a rule, appear to people exactly as he chose to appear; that is, as a man over forty, but carrying his years carelessly, an active muscular man, whose

blue eyes were still clear, whose fair hair waved ever so little less thickly than it used to on a low sunburnt forehead, over eyebrows almost silvery in their blondness, and blue eyes the bluer for their thatch. Stupid-looking? By no means. His smile denied that. Just self-sufficient enough to escape fatuity, yet so cool that one felt the fundamental coldness, he steered his way through life as easily and resolutely as he was now working his way through Mrs. Struthers's drawing-rooms.

Half-way, he was detained by a tap of Mrs. Wesson's red fan. Mrs. Wesson—surely, Mrs. Hazeldean reflected, Charles had spoken of Mrs. Sabina Wesson's being with her mother, old Mrs. Parrett, while they watched the fire? Sabina Wesson was a redoubtable woman, one of the few of her generation and her clan who had broken with tradition, and gone to

Mrs. Struthers's almost as soon as the Shoe-Polish Queen had bought her house in Fifth Avenue, and issued her first challenge to society. Lizzie Hazeldean shut her eyes for an instant; then, rising from her seat, she joined the group about the singer. From there she wandered on to another knot of acquaintances.

"Look here: the fellow's going to sing again. Let's get into that corner over there."

She felt ever so slight a touch on her arm, and met Henry Prest's composed glance.

A red-lit and palm-shaded recess divided the drawing-rooms from the dining-room, which ran across the width of the house at the back. Mrs. Hazeldean hesitated; then she caught Mrs. Wesson's watchful glance, lifted her head with a smile and followed her companion.

They sat down on a small sofa under the palms, and a couple, who had been in search of the same retreat, paused on the threshold, and with an interchange of glances passed on. Mrs. Hazeldean smiled more vividly.

"Where are my roses? Didn't you get them?" Prest asked. He had a way of looking her over from beneath lowered lids, while he affected to be examining a glove-button or contemplating the tip of his shining boot.

"Yes, I got them," she answered.

"You're not wearing them. I didn't order those."

"No."

"Whose are they, then?"

She unfolded her mother-of-pearl fan, and bent above its complicated traceries.

"Mine," she pronounced.

"Yours? Well, obviously. But I suppose someone sent them to you?"

"*I* did." She hesitated a second. "I sent them to myself."

He raised his eyebrows a little. "Well, they don't suit you—that washy pink! May I ask why you didn't wear mine?"

"I've already told you. . . I've often asked you never to send flowers . . . on the day. . ."

"Nonsense. That's the very day. . . What's the matter? Are you still nervous?"

She was silent for a moment; then she lowered her voice to say: "You ought not to have come here tonight."

"My dear girl, how unlike you! You *are* nervous."

"Didn't you see all those people in the Parretts' window?"

"What, opposite? Lord, no; I just

took to my heels! It was the deuce, the back way being barred. But what of it? In all that crowd, do you suppose for a moment—"

"My husband was in the window with them," she said, still lower.

His confident face fell for a moment, and then almost at once regained its look of easy arrogance.

"Well—?"

"Oh, nothing—as yet. Only I ask you . . . to go away now."

"Just as you asked me not to come! Yet *you* came, because you had the sense to see that if you didn't . . . and I came for the same reason. Look here, my dear, for God's sake don't lose your head!"

The challenge seemed to rouse her. She lifted her chin, glanced about the thronged room which they commanded from their corner, and nodded and smiled

invitingly at several acquaintances, with the hope that some one of them might come up to her. But though they all returned her greetings with a somewhat elaborate cordiality, not one advanced toward her secluded seat.

She turned her head slightly toward her companion. "I ask you again to go," she repeated.

"Well, I will then, after the fellow's sung. But I'm bound to say you're a good deal pleasanter—"

The first bars of *"Salve, Dimora"* silenced him, and they sat side by side in the meditative rigidity of fashionable persons listening to expensive music. She had thrown herself into a corner of the sofa, and Henry Prest, about whom everything was discreet but his eyes, sat apart from her, one leg crossed over the other, one hand holding his folded opera-hat on his

knee, while the other hand rested beside him on the sofa. But an end of her tulle scarf lay in the space between them; and without looking in his direction, without turning her glance from the singer, she was conscious that Prest's hand had reached and drawn the scarf toward him. She shivered a little, made an involuntary motion as though to gather it about her—and then desisted. As the song ended, he bent toward her slightly, said: "Darling" so low that it seemed no more than a breath on her cheek, and then, rising, bowed, and strolled into the other room.

She sighed faintly, and, settling herself once more in her corner, lifted her brilliant eyes to Sillerton Jackson, who was approaching. "It *was* good of you to bring Charlie home from the Parretts' this afternoon." She held out her hand, making way for him at her side.

"Good of me?" he laughed. "Why, I was glad of the chance of getting him safely home; it was rather naughty of *him* to be where he was, I suspect." She fancied a slight pause, as if he waited to see the effect of this, and her lashes beat her cheeks. But already he was going on: "Do you encourage him, with that cough, to run about town after fire-engines?"

She gave back the laugh.

"I don't discourage him—ever—if I can help it. But it *was* foolish of him to go out today," she agreed; and all the while she kept on asking herself, as she had that afternoon, in her talk with her husband: "Now, what would be the *natural* thing for me to say?"

Should she speak of having been at the fire herself—or should she not? The question dinned in her brain so loudly that she could hardly hear what her companion was

saying; yet she had, at the same time, a queer feeling of his never having been so close to her, or rather so closely intent on her, as now. In her strange state of nervous lucidity, her eyes seemed to absorb with a new precision every facial detail of whoever approached her; and old Sillerton Jackson's narrow mask, his withered pink cheeks, the veins in the hollow of his temples, under the carefully-tended silvery hair, and the tiny blood-specks in the white of his eyes as he turned their cautious blue gaze on her, appeared as if presented under some powerful lens. With his eyeglasses dangling over one white-gloved hand, the other supporting his opera-hat on his knee, he suggested, behind that assumed carelessness of pose, the patient fixity of a naturalist holding his breath near the crack from which some tiny animal might suddenly issue—if one watched

long enough, or gave it, completely enough, the impression of not looking for it, or dreaming it was anywhere near. The sense of that tireless attention made Mrs. Hazeldean's temples ache as if she sat under a glare of light even brighter than that of the Struthers' chandeliers—a glare in which each quiver of a half-formed thought might be as visible behind her forehead as the faint lines wrinkling its surface into an uncontrollable frown of anxiety. Yes, Prest was right; she was losing her head—losing it for the first time in the dangerous year during which she had had such continual need to keep it steady.

"What is it? What has happened to me?" she wondered.

There had been alarms before—how could it be otherwise? But they had only stimulated her, made her more alert and

prompt; whereas tonight she felt herself quivering away into she knew not what abyss of weakness. What was different, then? Oh, she knew well enough! It was Charles . . . that haggard look in his eyes, and the lines of his throat as he had leaned back sleeping. She had never before admitted to herself how ill she thought him; and now, to have to admit it, and at the same time not to have the complete certainty that the look in his eyes was caused by illness only, made the strain unbearable.

She glanced about her with a sudden sense of despair. Of all the people in those brilliant animated groups—of all the women who called her Lizzie, and the men who were familiars at her house—she knew that not one, at that moment, guessed, or could have understood, what she was feeling. . . Her eyes fell on

Henry Prest, who had come to the surface a little way off, bending over the chair of the handsome Mrs. Lyman. "And *you* least of all!" she thought. "Yet God knows," she added with a shiver, "they all have their theories about me!"

"My dear Mrs. Hazeldean, you look a little pale. Are you cold? Shall I get you some champagne?" Sillerton Jackson was officiously suggesting.

"If you think the other women look blooming! My dear man, it's this hideous vulgar overhead lighting. . ." She rose impatiently. It had occurred to her that the thing to do—the "natural" thing—would be to stroll up to Jinny Lyman, over whom Prest was still attentively bending. *Then* people would see if she was nervous, or ill—or afraid!

But half-way she stopped and thought: "Suppose the Parretts and Wessons *did*

see me? Then my joining Jinny while he's talking to her will look—how will it look?" She began to regret not having had it out on the spot with Sillerton Jackson, who could be trusted to hold his tongue on occasion, especially if a pretty woman threw herself on his mercy. She glanced over her shoulder as if to call him back; but he had turned away, been absorbed into another group, and she found herself, instead, abruptly face to face with Sabina Wesson. Well, perhaps that was better still. After all, it all depended on how much Mrs. Wesson had seen, and what line she meant to take, supposing she *had* seen anything. She was not likely to be as inscrutable as old Sillerton. Lizzie wished now that she had not forgotten to go to Mrs. Wesson's last party.

"Dear Mrs. Wesson, it was so kind of you—"

But Mrs. Wesson was not there. By the exercise of that mysterious protective power which enables a woman desirous of not being waylaid to make herself invisible, or to transport herself, by means imperceptible, to another part of the earth's surface, Mrs. Wesson, who, two seconds earlier, appeared in all her hard handsomeness to be bearing straight down on Mrs. Hazeldean, with a scant yard of clear *parquet* between them—Mrs. Wesson, as her animated back and her active red fan now called on all the company to notice, had never been there at all, had never seen Mrs. Hazeldean (*"Was* she at Mrs. Struthers's last Sunday? How odd! I must have left before she got there—"), but was busily engaged, on the farther side of the piano, in examining a picture to which her attention appeared to have been called by the persons nearest her.

"Ah, how *life-like!* That's what I always feel when I see a Meissonier," she was heard to exclaim, with her well-known instinct for the fitting epithet.

Lizzie Hazeldean stood motionless. Her eyes dazzled as if she had received a blow on the forehead. "So *that's* what it feels like!" she thought. She lifted her head very high, looked about her again, tried to signal to Henry Prest, but saw him still engaged with the lovely Mrs. Lyman, and at the same moment caught the glance of young Hubert Wesson, Sabina's eldest, who was standing in disengaged expectancy near the supper-room door.

Hubert Wesson, as his eyes met Mrs. Hazeldean's, crimsoned to the forehead, hung back a moment, and then came forward, bowing low—again that too low bow! "So *he* saw me too," she thought.

She put her hand on his arm with a laugh. "Dear me, how ceremonious you are! Really, I'm not as old as that bow of yours implies. My dear boy, I hope you want to take me in to supper at once. I was out in the cold all the afternoon, gazing at the Fifth Avenue Hotel fire, and I'm simply dying of hunger and fatigue."

There, the die was cast—she had said it loud enough for all the people nearest her to hear! And she was sure now that it was the right, the "natural" thing to do.

Her spirits rose, and she sailed into the supper-room like a goddess, steering Hubert to an unoccupied table in a flowery corner.

"No—I think we're very well by ourselves, don't you? Do you want that fat old bore of a Lucy Vanderlow to join us? If you *do,* of course . . . I can see she's dying to . . . but then, I warn you, I

shall ask a young man! Let me see—shall I ask Henry Prest? You see he's hovering! No, it *is* jollier with just you and me, isn't it?" She leaned forward a little, resting her chin on her clasped hands, her elbows on the table, in an attitude which the older women thought shockingly free, but the younger ones were beginning to imitate.

"And now, some champagne, please—and *hot* terrapin! . . . But I suppose you were at the fire yourself, weren't you?" she leaned still a little nearer to say.

The blush again swept over young Wesson's face, rose to his forehead, and turned the lobes of his large ears to balls of fire ("It looks," she thought, "as if he had on huge coral earrings."). But she forced him to look at her, laughed straight into his eyes, and went on: "Did you ever see a funnier sight than all those dressed-up

absurdities rushing out into the cold? It looked like the end of an Inauguration Ball! I was so fascinated that I actually pushed my way into the hall. The firemen were furious, but they couldn't stop me—nobody can stop me at a fire! You should have seen the ladies scuttling downstairs—the fat ones! Oh, but I beg your pardon; I'd forgotten that you admire . . . avoirdupois. No? But . . . Mrs. Van . . . so stupid of me! Why, you're actually blushing! I assure you, you're as red as your mother's fan—and visible from as great a distance! Yes, please; a little more champagne. . ."

And then the inevitable began. She forgot the fire, forgot her anxieties, forgot Mrs. Wesson's affront, forgot everything but the amusement, the passing childish amusement, of twirling around her little finger this shy clumsy boy, as she had

twirled so many others, old and young, not caring afterward if she ever saw them again, but so absorbed in the sport, and in her sense of knowing how to do it better than the other women—more quietly, more insidiously, without ogling, bridling or grimacing—that sometimes she used to ask herself with a shiver: "What was the gift given to me for?" Yes; it always amused her at first: the gradual dawn of attraction in eyes that had regarded her with indifference, the blood rising to the face, the way she could turn and twist the talk as though she had her victim on a leash, spinning him after her down winding paths of sentimentality, irony, caprice . . . and leaving him, with beating heart and dazzled eyes, to visions of an all-promising morrow. . . "My only accomplishment!" she murmured to herself as she rose from the table followed by young

Wesson's fascinated gaze, while already, on her own lips, she felt the taste of cinders.

"But at any rate," she thought, "he'll hold his tongue about having seen me at the fire."

V

SHE let herself in with her latch-key, glanced at the notes and letters on the hall-table (the old habit of allowing nothing to escape her), and stole up through the darkness to her room.

A fire still glowed in the chimney, and its light fell on two vases of crimson roses. The room was full of their scent.

Mrs. Hazeldean frowned, and then shrugged her shoulders. It had been a mistake, after all, to let it appear that she was indifferent to the flowers; she must remember to thank Susan for rescuing them. She began to undress, hastily yet clumsily, as if her deft fingers were all

thumbs; but first, detaching the two faded pink roses from her bosom, she put them with a reverent touch into a glass on the toilet-table. Then, slipping on her dressing-gown, she stole to her husband's door. It was shut, and she leaned her ear to the keyhole. After a moment she caught his breathing, heavy, as it always was when he had a cold, but regular, untroubled. . . With a sigh of relief she tiptoed back. Her uncovered bed, with its fresh pillows and satin coverlet, sent her a rosy invitation; but she cowered down by the fire, hugging her knees and staring into the coals.

"So *that's* what it feels like!" she repeated.

It was the first time in her life that she had ever been deliberately "cut"; and the cut was a deadly injury in old New York. For Sabina Wesson to have used it, con-

sciously, deliberately—for there was no doubt that she had purposely advanced toward her victim—she must have done so with intent to kill. And to risk that, she must have been sure of her facts, sure of corroborating witnesses, sure of being backed up by all her clan.

Lizzie Hazeldean had her clan too—but it was a small and weak one, and she hung on its outer fringe by a thread of little-regarded cousinship. As for the Hazeldean tribe, which was larger and stronger (though nothing like the great organized Wesson-Parrett *gens,* with half New York and all Albany at its back)—well, the Hazeldeans were not much to be counted on, and would even, perhaps, in a furtive negative way, be not too sorry ("if it were not for poor Charlie") that poor Charlie's wife should at last be made to pay for her good looks, her popularity,

above all for being, in spite of her origin, treated by poor Charlie as if she were one of them!

Her origin was, of course, respectable enough. Everybody knew all about the Winters—she had been Lizzie Winter. But the Winters were very small people, and her father, the Reverend Arcadius Winter, the sentimental over-popular Rector of a fashionable New York church, after a few seasons of too great success as preacher and director of female consciences, had suddenly had to resign and go to Bermuda for his health—or was it France?—to some obscure watering-place, it was rumoured. At any rate, Lizzie, who went with him (with a crushed bed-ridden mother), was ultimately, after the mother's death, fished out of a girls' school in Brussels—they seemed to have been in so many countries at once!—and brought

back to New York by a former parishioner of poor Arcadius's, who had always "believed in him," in spite of the Bishop, and who took pity on his lonely daughter.

The parishioner, Mrs. Mant, was "one of the Hazeldeans." She was a rich widow, given to generous gestures which she was often at a loss how to complete; and when she had brought Lizzie Winter home, and sufficiently celebrated her own courage in doing so, she did not quite know what step to take next. She had fancied it would be pleasant to have a clever handsome girl about the house; but her housekeeper was not of the same mind. The spare-room sheets had not been out of lavender for twenty years—and Miss Winter always left the blinds up in her room, and the carpet and curtains, unused to such exposure, suffered accordingly. Then young men began to call—they called in

numbers. Mrs. Mant had not supposed that the daughter of a clergyman—and a clergyman "under a cloud"—would expect visitors. She had imagined herself taking Lizzie Winter to Church Fairs, and having the stitches of her knitting picked up by the young girl, whose "eyes were better" than her benefactress's. But Lizzie did not know how to knit—she possessed no useful accomplishments—and she was visibly bored by Church Fairs, where her presence was of little use, since she had no money to spend. Mrs. Mant began to see her mistake; and the discovery made her dislike her protégée, whom she secretly regarded as having intentionally misled her.

In Mrs. Mant's life, the transition from one enthusiasm to another was always marked by an interval of disillusionment, during which, Providence having failed to

fulfill her requirements, its existence was openly called into question. But in this flux of moods there was one fixed point: Mrs. Mant was a woman whose life revolved about a bunch of keys. What treasures they gave access to, what disasters would have ensued had they been forever lost, was not quite clear; but whenever they were missed the household was in an uproar, and as Mrs. Mant would trust them to no one but herself, these occasions were frequent. One of them arose at the very moment when Mrs. Mant was recovering from her enthusiasm for Miss Winter. A minute before, the keys had been there, in a pocket of her work-table; she had actually touched them in hunting for her buttonhole-scissors. She had been called away to speak to the plumber about the bath-room leak, and when she left the room there was no one in it but Miss Win-

ter. When she returned, the keys were gone. The house had been turned inside out; everyone had been, if not accused, at least suspected; and in a rash moment Mrs. Mant had spoken of the police. The housemaid had thereupon given warning, and her own maid threatened to follow; when suddenly the Bishop's hints recurred to Mrs. Mant. The Bishop had always implied that there had been something irregular in Dr. Winter's accounts, besides the other unfortunate business. . .

Very mildly, she had asked Miss Winter if she might not have seen the keys, and "picked them up without thinking." Miss Winter permitted herself to smile in denying the suggestion; the smile irritated Mrs. Mant; and in a moment the floodgates were opened. She saw nothing to smile at in her question—unless it was of

a kind that Miss Winter was already used to, prepared for . . . with that sort of background . . . her unfortunate father. . .

"Stop!" Lizzie Winter cried. She remembered now, as if it had happened yesterday, the abyss suddenly opening at her feet. It was her first direct contact with human cruelty. Suffering, weakness, frailties other than Mrs. Mant's restricted fancy could have pictured, the girl had known, or at least suspected; but she had found as much kindness as folly in her path, and no one had ever before attempted to visit upon her the dimly-guessed shortcomings of her poor old father. She shook with horror as much as with indignation, and her "Stop!" blazed out so violently that Mrs. Mant, turning white, feebly groped for the bell.

And it was then, at that very moment,

that Charles Hazeldean came in—Charles Hazeldean, the favourite nephew, the pride of the tribe. Lizzie had seen him only once or twice, for he had been absent since her return to New York. She had thought him distinguished-looking, but rather serious and sarcastic; and he had apparently taken little notice of her—which perhaps accounted for her opinion.

"Oh, Charles, dearest Charles—that you should be here to hear such things said to me!" his aunt gasped, her hand on her outraged heart.

"What things? Said by whom? I see no one here to say them but Miss Winter," Charles had laughed, taking the girl's icy hand.

"Don't shake hands with her! She has insulted me! She has ordered me to keep silence—in my own house. 'Stop!' she said, when I was trying, in the kindness of

my heart, to get her to admit privately . . . Well, if she prefers to have the police. . ."

"I do! I ask you to send for them!" Lizzie cried.

How vividly she remembered all that followed: the finding of the keys, Mrs. Mant's reluctant apologies, her own cold acceptance of them, and the sense on both sides of the impossibility of continuing their life together! She had been wounded to the soul, and her own plight first revealed to her in all its destitution. Before that, despite the ups and downs of a wandering life, her youth, her good looks, the sense of a certain bright power over people and events, had hurried her along on a spring tide of confidence; she had never thought of herself as the dependent, the beneficiary, of the persons who were kind to her. Now she saw herself, at twenty, a

penniless girl, with a feeble discredited father carrying his snowy head, his unctuous voice, his edifying manner from one cheap watering-place to another, through an endless succession of sentimental and pecuniary entanglements. To him she could be of no more help than he to her; and save for him she was alone. The Winter cousins, as much humiliated by his disgrace as they had been puffed-up by his triumphs, let it be understood, when the breach with Mrs. Mant became known, that they were not in a position to interfere; and among Dr. Winter's former parishioners none was left to champion him. Almost at the same time, Lizzie heard that he was about to marry a Portuguese opera-singer and be received into the Church of Rome; and this crowning scandal too promptly justified his family.

The situation was a grave one, and

called for energetic measures. Lizzie understood it—and a week later she was engaged to Charles Hazeldean.

She always said afterward that but for the keys he would never have thought of marrying her; while he laughingly affirmed that, on the contrary, but for the keys she would never have looked at *him*.

But what did it all matter, in the complete and blessed understanding which was to follow on their hasty union? If all the advantages on both sides had been weighed and found equal by judicious advisers, harmony more complete could hardly have been predicted. As a matter of fact, the advisers, had they been judicious, would probably have found only elements of discord in the characters concerned. Charles Hazeldean was by nature an observer and a student, brooding and curious of mind: Lizzie Winter (as she looked back at her-

self)—what was she, what would she ever be, but a quick, ephemeral creature, in whom a perpetual and adaptable activity simulated mind, as her grace, her swiftness, her expressiveness simulated beauty? So others would have judged her; so, now, she judged herself. And she knew that in fundamental things she was still the same. And yet she had satisfied him: satisfied him, to all appearances, as completely in the quiet later years as in the first flushed hours. As completely, or perhaps even more so. In the early months, dazzled gratitude made her the humbler, fonder worshipper; but as her powers expanded in the warm air of comprehension, as she felt herself grow handsomer, cleverer, more competent and more companionable than he had hoped, or she had dreamed herself capable of becoming, the balance was imperceptibly reversed, and the tri-

umph in his eyes when they rested on her.

The Hazeldeans were conquered; they had to admit it. Such a brilliant recruit to the clan was not to be disowned. Mrs. Mant was left to nurse her grievance in solitude, till she too fell into line, carelessly but handsomely forgiven.

Ah, those first years of triumph! They frightened Lizzie now as she looked back. One day, the friendless defenceless daughter of a discredited man; the next, almost, the wife of Charlie Hazeldean, the popular successful young lawyer, with a good practice already assured, and the best of professional and private prospects. His own parents were dead, and had died poor; but two or three childless relatives were understood to be letting their capital accumulate for his benefit, and meanwhile in Lizzie's thrifty hands his earnings were largely sufficient.

Ah, those first years! There had been barely six; but even now there were moments when their sweetness drenched her to the soul. . . Barely six; and then the sharp re-awakening of an inherited weakness of the heart that Hazeldean and his doctors had imagined to be completely cured. Once before, for the same cause, he had been sent off, suddenly, for a year of travel in mild climates and distant scenes; and his first return had coincided with the close of Lizzie's sojourn at Mrs. Mant's. The young man felt sure enough of the future to marry and take up his professional duties again, and for the following six years he had led, without interruption, the busy life of a successful lawyer; then had come a second breakdown, more unexpectedly, and with more alarming symptoms. The "Hazeldean heart" was a proverbial boast in the fam-

ily; the Hazeldeans privately considered it more distinguished than the Sillerton gout, and far more refined than the Wesson liver; and it had permitted most of them to survive, in valetudinarian ease, to a ripe old age, when they died of some quite other disorder. But Charles Hazeldean had defied it, and it took its revenge, and took it savagely.

One by one, hopes and plans faded. The Hazeldeans went south for a winter; he lay on a deck-chair in a Florida garden, and read and dreamed, and was happy with Lizzie beside him. So the months passed; and by the following autumn he was better, returned to New York, and took up his profession. Intermittently but obstinately, he had continued the struggle for two more years; but before they were over husband and wife understood that the good days were done.

He could be at his office only at lengthening intervals; he sank gradually into invalidism without submitting to it. His income dwindled; and, indifferent for himself, he fretted ceaselessly at the thought of depriving Lizzie of the least of her luxuries.

At heart she was indifferent to them too; but she could not convince him of it. He had been brought up in the old New York tradition, which decreed that a man, at whatever cost, must provide his wife with what she had always "been accustomed to"; and he had gloried too much in her prettiness, her elegance, her easy way of wearing her expensive dresses, and his friends' enjoyment of the good dinners she knew how to order, not to accustom her to everything which could enhance such graces. Mrs. Mant's secret satisfaction rankled in him. She sent him Baltimore

terrapin, and her famous clam broth, and a dozen of the old Hazeldean port, and said "I told you so" to her confidants when Lizzie was mentioned; and Charles Hazeldean knew it, and swore at it.

"I won't be pauperized by her!" he declared; but Lizzie smiled away his anger, and persuaded him to taste the terrapin and sip the port.

She was smiling faintly at the memory of the last passage between him and Mrs. Mant when the turning of the bedroom door-handle startled her. She jumped up, and he stood there. The blood rushed to her forehead; his expression frightened her; for an instant she stared at him as if he had been an enemy. Then she saw that the look in his face was only the remote lost look of excessive physical pain.

She was at his side at once, supporting him, guiding him to the nearest armchair.

He sank into it, and she flung a shawl over him, and knelt at his side while his inscrutable eyes continued to repel her.

"Charles . . . Charles," she pleaded.

For a while he could not speak; and she said to herself that she would perhaps never know whether he had sought her because he was ill, or whether illness had seized him as he entered her room to question, accuse, or reveal what he had seen or heard that afternoon.

Suddenly he lifted his hand and pressed back her forehead, so that her face lay bare under his eyes.

"Love, love—you've been happy?"

"Happy?" The word choked her. She clung to him, burying her anguish against his knees. His hand stirred weakly in her hair, and gathering her whole strength into the gesture, she raised her head again,

looked into his eyes, and breathed back: "And you?"

He gave her one full look; all their life together was in it, from the first day to the last. His hand brushed her once more, like a blessing, and then dropped. The moment of their communion was over; the next she was preparing remedies, ringing for the servants, ordering the doctor to be called. Her husband was once more the harmless helpless captive that sickness makes of the most dreaded and the most loved.

VI

IT was in Mrs. Mant's drawing-room that, some half-year later, Mrs. Charles Hazeldean, after a moment's hesitation, said to the servant that, yes, he might show in Mr. Prest.

Mrs. Mant was away. She had been leaving for Washington to visit a new protégée when Mrs. Hazeldean arrived from Europe, and after a rapid consultation with the clan had decided that it would not be "decent" to let poor Charles's widow go to an hotel. Lizzie had therefore the strange sensation of returning, after nearly nine years, to the house from which her husband had tri-

umphantly rescued her; of returning there, to be sure, in comparative independence, and without danger of falling into her former bondage, yet with every nerve shrinking from all that the scene revived.

Mrs. Mant, the next day, had left for Washington; but before starting she had tossed a note across the breakfast-table to her visitor.

"Very proper—he was one of Charlie's oldest friends, I believe?" she said, with her mild frosty smile. Mrs. Hazeldean glanced at the note, turned it over as if to examine the signature, and restored it to her hostess.

"Yes. But I don't think I care to see anyone just yet."

There was a pause, during which the butler brought in fresh griddle-cakes, replenished the hot milk, and withdrew. As the door closed on him, Mrs. Mant said,

with a dangerous cordiality: "No one would misunderstand your receiving an old friend of your husband's . . . like Mr. Prest."

Lizzie Hazeldean cast a sharp glance at the large empty mysterious face across the table. They *wanted* her to receive Henry Prest, then? Ah, well . . . perhaps she understood. . .

"Shall I answer this for you, my dear? Or will you?" Mrs. Mant pursued.

"Oh, as you like. But don't fix a day, please. Later—"

Mrs. Mant's face again became vacuous. She murmured: "You must not shut yourself up too much. It will not do to be morbid. I'm sorry to have to leave you here alone—"

Lizzie's eyes filled: Mrs. Mant's sympathy seemed more cruel than her cruelty.

Every word that she used had a veiled taunt for its counterpart.

"Oh, you mustn't think of giving up your visit—"

"My dear, how can I? It's a *duty.* I'll send a line to Henry Prest, then. . . If you would sip a little port at luncheon and dinner we should have you looking less like a ghost. . ."

Mrs. Mant departed; and two days later—the interval was "decent"—Mr. Henry Prest was announced. Mrs. Hazeldean had not seen him since the previous New Year's day. Their last words had been exchanged in Mrs. Struthers's crimson boudoir, and since then half a year had elapsed. Charles Hazeldean had lingered for a fortnight; but though there had been ups and downs, and intervals of hope when none could have criticised his

wife for seeing her friends, her door had been barred against everyone. She had not excluded Henry Prest more rigorously than the others; he had simply been one of the many who received, day by day, the same answer: "Mrs. Hazeldean sees no one but the family."

Almost immediately after her husband's death she had sailed for Europe on a long-deferred visit to her father, who was now settled at Nice; but from this expedition she had presumably brought back little comfort, for when she arrived in New York her relations were struck by her air of ill-health and depression. It spoke in her favour, however; they were agreed that she was behaving with propriety.

She looked at Henry Prest as if he were a stranger: so difficult was it, at the first moment, to fit his robust and splendid

person into the region of twilight shades which, for the last months, she had inhabited. She was beginning to find that everyone had an air of remoteness; she seemed to see people and life through the confusing blur of the long crape veil in which it was a widow's duty to shroud her affliction. But she gave him her hand without perceptible reluctance.

He lifted it toward his lips, in an obvious attempt to combine gallantry with condolence, and then, half-way up, seemed to feel that the occasion required him to release it.

"Well—you'll admit that I've been patient!" he exclaimed.

"Patient? Yes. What else was there to be?" she rejoined with a faint smile, as he seated himself beside her, a little too near.

"Oh, well . . . of course! I under-

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stood all that, I hope you'll believe. But mightn't you at least have answered my letters—one or two of them?"

She shook her head. "I couldn't write."

"Not to anyone? Or not to me?" he queried, with ironic emphasis.

"I wrote only the letters I had to—no others."

"Ah, I see." He laughed slightly. "And you didn't consider that letters to *me* were among them?"

She was silent, and he stood up and took a turn across the room. His face was redder than usual, and now and then a twitch passed over it. She saw that he felt the barrier of her crape, and that it left him baffled and resentful. A struggle was still perceptibly going on in him between his traditional standard of behaviour at such a meeting, and primitive impulses renewed by the memory of their

last hours together. When he turned back and paused before her his ruddy flush had paled, and he stood there, frowning, uncertain, and visibly resenting the fact that she made him so.

"You sit there like a stone!" he said.

"I feel like a stone."

"Oh, come—!"

She knew well enough what he was thinking: that the only way to bridge over such a bad beginning was to get the woman into your arms—and talk afterward. It was the classic move. He had done it dozens of times, no doubt, and was evidently asking himself why the deuce he couldn't do it now. . . But something in her look must have benumbed him. He sat down again beside her.

"What you must have been through, dearest!" He waited and coughed. "I

can understand your being—all broken up. But I know nothing; remember, I know nothing as to what actually happened. . ."

"Nothing happened."

"As to—what we feared? No hint—?"

She shook her head.

He cleared his throat before the next question. "And you don't think that in your absence he may have spoken—to anyone?"

"Never!"

"Then, my dear, we seem to have had the most unbelievable good luck; and I can't see—"

He had edged slowly nearer, and now laid a large ringed hand on her sleeve. How well she knew those rings—the two dull gold snakes with malevolent jewelled eyes! She sat as motionless as if their

coils were about her, till slowly his tentative grasp relaxed.

"Lizzie, you know"—his tone was discouraged—"this is morbid. . ."

"Morbid?"

"When you're safe out of the worst scrape . . . and free, my darling, *free!* Don't you realize it? I suppose the strain's been too much for you; but I want you to feel that now—"

She stood up suddenly, and put half the length of the room between them.

"Stop! Stop! Stop!" she almost screamed, as she had screamed long ago at Mrs. Mant.

He stood up also, darkly red under his rich sunburn, and forced a smile.

"Really," he protested, "all things considered—and after a separation of six months!" She was silent. "My dear,"

he continued mildly, "will you tell me what you expect me to think?"

"Oh, don't take that tone," she murmured.

"What tone?"

"As if—as if—you still imagined we could go back—"

She saw his face fall. Had he ever before, she wondered, stumbled upon an obstacle in that smooth walk of his? It flashed over her that this was the danger besetting men who had a "way with women"—the day came when they might follow it too blindly.

The reflection evidently occurred to him almost as soon as it did to her. He summoned another propitiatory smile, and drawing near, took her hand gently. "But I don't want to go back. . . I want to go forward, dearest. . . Now that at last you're free."

She seized on the word as if she had been waiting for her cue. "Free! Oh, that's it—*free!* Can't you see, can't you understand, that I mean to stay free?"

Again a shadow of distrust crossed his face, and the smile he had begun for her reassurance seemed to remain on his lips for his own.

"But of course! Can you imagine that I want to put you in chains? I want you to be as free as you please—free to love me as much as you choose!" He was visibly pleased with the last phrase.

She drew away her hand, but not unkindly. "I'm sorry—I *am* sorry, Henry. But you don't understand."

"What don't I understand?"

"That what you ask is quite impossible—ever. I can't go on . . . in the old way. . ."

She saw his face working nervously.

"In the old way? You mean—?" Before she could explain he hurried on with an increasing majesty of manner: "Don't answer! I see—I understand. When you spoke of freedom just now I was misled for a moment—I frankly own I was—into thinking that, after your wretched marriage, you might prefer discreeter ties . . . an apparent independence which would leave us both. . . I say *apparent*, for on my side there has never been the least wish to conceal. . . But if I was mistaken, if on the contrary what you wish is . . . is to take advantage of your freedom to regularize our . . . our attachment. . ."

She said nothing, not because she had any desire to have him complete the phrase, but because she found nothing to say. To all that concerned their common past she was aware of offering a numbed

soul. But her silence evidently perplexed him, and in his perplexity he began to lose his footing, and to flounder in a sea of words.

"Lizzie! Do you hear me? If I was mistaken, I say—and I hope I'm not above owning that at times I *may* be mistaken; if I was—why, by God, my dear, no woman ever heard me speak the words before; but here I am to have and to hold, as the Book says! Why, hadn't you realized it? Lizzie, look up—! *I'm asking you to marry me.*"

Still, for a moment, she made no reply, but stood gazing about her as if she had the sudden sense of unseen presences between them. At length she gave a faint laugh. It visibly ruffled her visitor.

"I'm not conscious," he began again, "of having said anything particularly laughable—" He stopped and scruti-

nized her narrowly, as though checked by the thought that there might be something not quite normal. . . Then, apparently reassured, he half-murmured his only French phrase: *"La joie fait peur . . .* eh?"

She did not seem to hear. "I wasn't laughing at you," she said, "but only at the coincidences of life. It was in this room that my husband asked me to marry him."

"Ah?" Her suitor appeared politely doubtful of the good taste, or the opportunity, of producing this reminiscence. But he made another call on his magnanimity. "Really? But, I say, my dear, I couldn't be expected to know it, could I? If I'd guessed that such a painful association—"

"Painful?" She turned upon him. "A painful association? Do you think that

was what I meant?" Her voice sank. "This room is sacred to me."

She had her eyes on his face, which, perhaps because of its architectural completeness, seemed to lack the mobility necessary to follow such a leap of thought. It was so ostensibly a solid building, and not a nomad's tent. He struggled with a ruffled pride, rose again to playful magnanimity, and murmured: "Compassionate angel!"

"Oh, compassionate? To whom? Do you imagine—did I ever say anything to make you doubt the truth of what I'm telling you?"

His brows fretted: his temper was up. "*Say* anything? No," he insinuated ironically; then, in a hasty plunge after his lost forbearance, added with exquisite mildness: "Your tact was perfect . . . always. I've invariably done you that justice. No one could have been more

thoroughly the . . . the lady. I never failed to admire your good-breeding in avoiding any reference to your . . . your other life."

She faced him steadily. "Well, that other life *was* my life—my only life! Now you know."

There was a silence. Henry Prest drew out a monogrammed handkerchief and passed it over his dry lips. As he did so, a whiff of his eau de Cologne reached her, and she winced a little. It was evident that he was seeking what to say next; wondering, rather helplessly, how to get back his lost command of the situation. He finally induced his features to break again into a persuasive smile.

"Not your *only* life, dearest," he reproached her.

She met it instantly. "Yes; so you thought—because I chose you should."

"You chose—?" The smile became incredulous.

"Oh, deliberately. But I suppose I've no excuse that you would not dislike to hear. . . Why shouldn't we break off now?"

"Break off . . . this conversation?" His tone was aggrieved. "Of course I've no wish to force myself—"

She interrupted him with a raised hand. "Break off for good, Henry."

"For good?" He stared, and gave a quick swallow, as though the dose were choking him. "For good? Are you really —? You and I? Is this serious, Lizzie?"

"Perfectly. But if you prefer to hear . . . what can only be painful. . ."

He straightened himself, threw back his shoulders, and said in an uncertain voice: "I hope you don't take me for a coward."

She made no direct reply, but con-

tinued: "Well, then, you thought I loved you, I suppose—"

He smiled again, revived his moustache with a slight twist, and gave a hardly perceptible shrug. "You . . . ah . . . managed to produce the illusion. . ."

"Oh, well, yes: a woman *can*—so easily! That's what men often forget. You thought I was a lovelorn mistress; and I was only an expensive prostitute."

"Elizabeth!" he gasped, pale now to the ruddy eyelids. She saw that the word had wounded more than his pride, and that, before realizing the insult to his love, he was shuddering at the offence to his taste. Mistress! Prostitute! Such words were banned. No one reproved coarseness of language in women more than Henry Prest; one of Mrs. Hazeldean's greatest charms (as he had just told her) had been her way of remaining,

"through it all," so ineffably "the lady." He looked at her as if a fresh doubt of her sanity had assailed him.

"Shall I go on?" she smiled.

He bent his head stiffly. "I am still at a loss to imagine for what purpose you made a fool of me."

"Well, then, it was as I say. I wanted money—money for my husband."

He moistened his lips. "For your husband?"

"Yes; when he began to be so ill; when he needed comforts, luxury, the opportunity to get away. He saved me, when I was a girl, from untold humiliation and wretchedness. No one else lifted a finger to help me—not one of my own family. I hadn't a penny or a friend. Mrs. Mant had grown sick of me, and was trying to find an excuse to throw me over. Oh, you don't know what a girl has to put up with

—a girl alone in the world—who depends for her clothes, and her food, and the roof over her head, on the whims of a vain capricious old woman! It was because *he* knew, because he understood, that he married me. . . He took me out of misery into blessedness. He put me up above them all . . . he put me beside himself. I didn't care for anything but that; I didn't care for the money or the freedom; I cared only for him. I would have followed him into the desert—I would have gone barefoot to be with him. I would have starved, begged, done anything for him—*anything*." She broke off, her voice lost in a sob. She was no longer aware of Prest's presence—all her consciousness was absorbed in the vision she had evoked. "It was *he* who cared—who wanted me to be rich and independent and admired! He wanted to heap every-

thing on me—during the first years I could hardly persuade him to keep enough money for himself. . . And then he was taken ill; and as he got worse, and gradually dropped out of affairs, his income grew smaller, and then stopped altogether; and all the while there were new expenses piling up—nurses, doctors, travel; and he grew frightened; frightened not for himself but for me. . . And what was I to do? I had to pay for things somehow. For the first year I managed to put off paying—then I borrowed small sums here and there. But that couldn't last. And all the while I had to keep on looking pretty and prosperous, or else he began to worry, and think we were ruined, and wonder what would become of me if he didn't get well. By the time you came I was desperate—I would have done anything, anything! He thought the money

came from my Portuguese stepmother. She really was rich, as it happens. Unluckily my poor father tried to invest her money, and lost it all; but when they were first married she sent a thousand dollars —and all the rest, all you gave me, I built on that."

She paused pantingly, as if her tale were at an end. Gradually her consciousness of present things returned, and she saw Henry Prest, as if far off, a small indistinct figure looming through the mist of her blurred eyes. She thought to herself: "He doesn't believe me," and the thought exasperated her.

"You wonder, I suppose," she began again, "that a woman should dare confess such things about herself—"

He cleared his throat. "About herself? No; perhaps not. But about her husband."

The blood rushed to her forehead. "About her husband? But you don't dare to imagine—?"

"You leave me," he rejoined icily, "no other inference that I can see." She stood dumbfounded, and he added: "At any rate, it certainly explains your extraordinary coolness—pluck, I used to think it. I perceive that I needn't have taken such precautions."

She considered this. "You think, then, that he knew? You think, perhaps, that I knew he did?" She pondered again painfully, and then her face lit up. "He never knew—never! That's enough for me—and for you it doesn't matter. Think what you please. He was happy to the end—that's all I care for."

"There can be no doubt about your frankness," he said with pinched lips.

"There's no longer any reason for not being frank."

He picked up his hat, and studiously considered its lining; then he took the gloves he had laid in it, and drew them thoughtfully through his hands. She thought: "Thank God, he's going!"

But he set the hat and gloves down on a table, and moved a little nearer to her. His face looked as ravaged as a reveller's at daybreak.

"You—leave positively nothing to the imagination!" he murmured.

"I told you it was useless—" she began; but he interrupted her: "Nothing, that is —if I believed you." He moistened his lips again, and tapped them with his handkerchief. Again she had a whiff of the eau de Cologne. "But I don't!" he proclaimed. "Too many memories . . . too many . . . proofs, my dearest. . ." He

stopped, smiling somewhat convulsively. She saw that he imagined the smile would soothe her.

She remained silent, and he began once more, as if appealing to her against her own verdict: "I know better, Lizzie. In spite of everything, *I know you're not that kind of woman.*"

"I took your money—"

"As a favour. I knew the difficulties of your position. . . I understood completely. I beg of you never again to allude to—all that." It dawned on her that anything would be more endurable to him than to think he had been a dupe—and one of two dupes! The part was not one that he could conceive of having played. His pride was up in arms to defend her, not so much for her sake as for his own. The discovery gave her a baffling sense of helplessness; against that impene-

trable self-sufficiency all her affirmations might spend themselves in vain.

"No man who has had the privilege of being loved by you could ever for a moment. . ."

She raised her head and looked at him. "You have never had that privilege," she interrupted.

His jaw fell. She saw his eyes pass from uneasy supplication to a cold anger. He gave a little inarticulate grunt before his voice came back to him.

"You spare no pains in degrading yourself in my eyes."

"I am not degrading myself. I am telling you the truth. I needed money. I knew no way of earning it. You were willing to give it . . . for what you call the privilege. . ."

"Lizzie," he interrupted solemnly, "don't go on! I believe I enter into all

your feelings—I believe I always have. In so sensitive, so hypersensitive a nature, there are moments when every other feeling is swept away by scruples. . . For those scruples I only honour you the more. But I won't hear another word now. If I allowed you to go on in your present state of . . . nervous exaltation . . . you might be the first to deplore. . . I wish to forget everything you have said. . . I wish to look forward, not back. . ." He squared his shoulders, took a deep breath, and fixed her with a glance of recovered confidence. "How little you know me if you believe that I could fail you *now!*"

She returned his look with a weary steadiness. "You are kind—you mean to be generous, I'm sure. But don't you see that I *can't* marry you?"

"I only see that, in the natural rush of your remorse—"

"Remorse? Remorse?" She broke in with a laugh. "Do you imagine I feel any remorse? I'd do it all over again tomorrow—for the same object! I got what I wanted—I gave him that last year, that last good year. It was the relief from anxiety that kept him alive, that kept him happy. Oh, he *was* happy—I know that!" She turned to Prest with a strange smile. "I do thank you for that—I'm not ungrateful."

"You . . . you . . . *ungrateful?* This . . . is really . . . indecent. . ." He took up his hat again, and stood in the middle of the room as if waiting to be waked from a bad dream.

"You are—rejecting an opportunity—" he began.

She made a faint motion of assent.

"You do realize it? I'm still prepared to—to help you, if you should. . ." She made no answer, and he continued: "How do you expect to live—since you have chosen to drag in such considerations?"

"I don't care how I live. I never wanted the money for myself."

He raised a deprecating hand. "Oh, don't—*again!* The woman I had meant to. . ." Suddenly, to her surprise, she saw a glitter of moisture on his lower lids. He applied his handkerchief to them, and the waft of scent checked her momentary impulse of compunction. That Cologne water! It called up picture after picture with a hideous precision. "Well, it was worth it," she murmured doggedly.

Henry Prest restored his handkerchief to his pocket. He waited, glanced about the room, turned back to her.

"If your decision is final—"

"Oh, final!"

He bowed. "There is one thing more—which I should have mentioned if you had ever given me the opportunity of seeing you after—after last New Year's day. Something I preferred not to commit to writing—"

"Yes?" she questioned indifferently.

"Your husband, you are positively convinced, had no idea . . . that day . . .?"

"None."

"Well, others, it appears, had." He paused. "Mrs. Wesson saw us."

"So I supposed. I remember now that she went out of her way to cut me that evening at Mrs. Struthers's."

"Exactly. And she was not the only person who saw us. If people had not been disarmed by your husband's falling ill that very day you would have found yourself—ostracized."

She made no comment, and he pursued, with a last effort: "In your grief, your solitude, you haven't yet realized what your future will be—how difficult. It is what I wished to guard you against—it was my purpose in asking you to marry me." He drew himself up and smiled as if he were looking at his own reflection in a mirror, and thought favourably of it. "A man who has had the misfortune to compromise a woman is bound in honour —Even if my own inclination were not what it is, I should consider. . ."

She turned to him with a softened smile. Yes, he had really brought himself to think that he was proposing to marry her to save her reputation. At this glimpse of the old hackneyed axioms on which he actually believed that his conduct was based, she felt anew her remoteness from the life he would have drawn her back to.

"My poor Henry, don't you see how far I've got beyond the Mrs. Wessons? If all New York wants to ostracize me, let it! I've had my day . . . no woman has more than one. Why shouldn't I have to pay for it? I'm ready."

"Good heavens!" he murmured.

She was aware that he had put forth his last effort. The wound she had inflicted had gone to the most vital spot; she had prevented his being magnanimous, and the injury was unforgivable. He was glad, yes, actually glad now, to have her know that New York meant to cut her; but, strive as she might, she could not bring herself to care either for the fact, or for his secret pleasure in it. Her own secret pleasures were beyond New York's reach and his.

"I'm sorry," she reiterated gently. He

bowed, without trying to take her hand, and left the room.

As the door closed she looked after him with a dazed stare. "He's right, I suppose; I don't realize yet—" She heard the shutting of the outer door, and dropped to the sofa, pressing her hands against her aching eyes. At that moment, for the first time, she asked herself what the next day, and the next, would be like. . .

"If only I cared more about reading," she moaned, remembering how vainly she had tried to acquire her husband's tastes, and how gently and humorously he had smiled at her efforts. "Well—there are always cards; and when I get older, knitting and patience, I suppose. And if everybody cuts me I shan't need any evening dresses. That will be an economy, at any rate," she concluded with a little shiver.

VII

. . . . . .

"SHE was *bad* . . . always. They used to meet at the Fifth Avenue Hotel."

I must go back now to this phrase of my mother's—the phrase from which, at the opening of my narrative, I broke away for a time in order to project more vividly on the scene that anxious moving vision of Lizzie Hazeldean: a vision in which memories of my one boyish glimpse of her were pieced together with hints collected afterward.

When my mother uttered her condemnatory judgment I was a young man of twenty-one, newly graduated from Har-

vard, and at home again under the family roof in New York. It was long since I had heard Mrs. Hazeldean spoken of. I had been away, at school and at Harvard, for the greater part of the interval, and in the holidays she was probably not considered a fitting subject of conversation, especially now that my sisters came to the table.

At any rate, I had forgotten everything I might ever have picked up about her when, on the evening after my return, my cousin Hubert Wesson—now towering above me as a pillar of the Knickerbocker Club, and a final authority on the ways of the world—suggested our joining her at the opera.

"Mrs. Hazeldean? But I don't know her. What will she think?"

"That it's all right. Come along. She's the jolliest woman I know. We'll go

back afterward and have supper with her —jolliest house I know." Hubert twirled a self-conscious moustache.

We were dining at the Knickerbocker, to which I had just been elected, and the bottle of Pommery we were finishing disposed me to think that nothing could be more fitting for two men of the world than to end their evening in the box of the jolliest woman Hubert knew. I groped for my own moustache, gave a twirl in the void, and followed him, after meticulously sliding my overcoat sleeve around my silk hat as I had seen him do.

But once in Mrs. Hazeldean's box I was only an overgrown boy again, bathed in such blushes as used, at the same age, to visit Hubert, forgetting that I had a moustache to twirl, and knocking my hat from the peg on which I had just hung

it, in my zeal to pick up a programme she had not dropped.

For she was really too lovely—too formidably lovely. I was used by now to mere unadjectived loveliness, the kind that youth and spirits hang like a rosy veil over commonplace features, an average outline and a pointless merriment. But this was something calculated, accomplished, finished—and just a little worn. It frightened me with my first glimpse of the infinity of beauty and the multiplicity of her pit-falls. What! There were women who need not fear crow's-feet, were more beautiful for being pale, could let a silver hair or two show among the dark, and their eyes brood inwardly while they smiled and chatted? But then no young man was safe for a moment! But then the world I had hitherto known had been only a warm pink nursery, while

this new one was a place of darkness, perils and enchantments. . .

It was the next day that one of my sisters asked me where I had been the evening before, and that I puffed out my chest to answer: "With Mrs. Hazeldean —at the opera." My mother looked up, but did not speak till the governess had swept the girls off; then she said with pinched lips: "Hubert Wesson took you to Mrs. Hazeldean's box?"

"Yes."

"Well, a young man may go where he pleases. I hear Hubert is still infatuated; it serves Sabina right for not letting him marry the youngest Lyman girl. But don't mention Mrs. Hazeldean again before your sisters. . . They say her husband never knew—I suppose if he *had* she would never have got old Miss Cecilia Winter's money." And it was then that

my mother pronounced the name of Henry Prest, and added that phrase about the Fifth Avenue Hotel which suddenly woke my boyish memories. . .

In a flash I saw again, under its quickly-lowered veil, the face with the exposed eyes and the frozen smile, and felt through my grown-up waistcoat the stab to my boy's heart and the loosened murmur of my soul; felt all this, and at the same moment tried to relate that former face, so fresh and clear despite its anguish, to the smiling guarded countenance of Hubert's "jolliest woman I know."

I was familiar with Hubert's indiscriminate use of his one adjective, and had not expected to find Mrs. Hazeldean "jolly" in the literal sense: in the case of the lady he happened to be in love with the epithet simply meant that she justified his choice. Nevertheless, as I compared Mrs. Hazel-

dean's earlier face to this one, I had my first sense of what may befall in the long years between youth and maturity, and of how short a distance I had travelled on that mysterious journey. If only she would take me by the hand!

I was not wholly unprepared for my mother's comment. There was no other lady in Mrs. Hazeldean's box when we entered; none joined her during the evening, and our hostess offered no apology for her isolation. In the New York of my youth every one knew what to think of a woman who was seen "alone at the opera"; if Mrs. Hazeldean was not openly classed with Fanny Ring, our one conspicuous "professional," it was because, out of respect for her social origin, New York preferred to avoid such juxtapositions. Young as I was, I knew this social law, and had guessed, before the evening was

over, that Mrs. Hazeldean was not a lady on whom other ladies called, though she was not, on the other hand, a lady whom it was forbidden to mention to other ladies. So I did mention her, with bravado.

No ladies showed themselves at the opera with Mrs. Hazeldean; but one or two dropped in to the jolly supper announced by Hubert, an entertainment whose jollity consisted in a good deal of harmless banter over broiled canvas-backs and celery, with the best of champagne. These same ladies I sometimes met at her house afterward. They were mostly younger than their hostess, and still, though precariously, within the social pale: pretty trivial creatures, bored with a monotonous prosperity, and yearning for such unlawful joys as cigarettes, plain speaking, and a drive home in the small

hours with the young man of the moment. But such daring spirits were few in old New York, their appearances infrequent and somewhat furtive. Mrs. Hazeldean's society consisted mainly of men, men of all ages, from her bald or grey-headed contemporaries to youths of Hubert's accomplished years and raw novices of mine.

A great dignity and decency prevailed in her little circle. It was not the oppressive respectability which weighs on the reformed *déclassée,* but the air of ease imparted by a woman of distinction who has wearied of society and closed her doors to all save her intimates. One always felt, at Lizzie Hazeldean's, that the next moment one's grandmother and aunts might be announced; and yet so pleasantly certain that they wouldn't be.

What is there in the atmosphere of such

houses that makes them so enchanting to a fastidious and imaginative youth? Why is it that "those women" (as the others call them) alone know how to put the awkward at ease, check the familiar, smile a little at the over-knowing, and yet encourage naturalness in all? The difference of atmosphere is felt on the very threshold. The flowers grow differently in their vases, the lamps and easy-chairs have found a cleverer way of coming together, the books on the table are the very ones that one is longing to get hold of. The most perilous coquetry may not be in a woman's way of arranging her dress but in her way of arranging her drawing-room; and in this art Mrs. Hazeldean excelled.

I have spoken of books; even then they were usually the first objects to attract me in a room, whatever else of beauty it

contained; and I remember, on the evening of that first "jolly supper," coming to an astonished pause before the crowded shelves that took up one wall of the drawing-room. What! The goddess read, then? She could accompany one on those flights too? Lead one, no doubt? My heart beat high. . .

But I soon learned that Lizzie Hazeldean did not read. She turned but languidly even the pages of the last Ouida novel; and I remember seeing Mallock's *New Republic* uncut on her table for weeks. It took me no long time to make the discovery: at my very next visit she caught my glance of surprise in the direction of the rich shelves, smiled, coloured a little, and met it with the confession: "No, I can't read them. I've tried—I *have* tried—but print makes me sleepy. Even novels do. . ." "They" were the

accumulated treasures of English poetry, and a rich and varied selection of history, criticism, letters, in English, French and Italian—she spoke these languages, I knew—books evidently assembled by a sensitive and widely-ranging reader. We were alone at the time, and Mrs. Hazeldean went on in a lower tone: "I kept just the few he liked best—my husband, you know." It was the first time that Charles Hazeldean's name had been spoken between us, and my surprise was so great that my candid cheek must have reflected the blush on hers. I had fancied that women in her situation avoided alluding to their husbands. But she continued to look at me, wistfully, humbly almost, as if there were something more that she wanted to say, and was inwardly entreating me to understand.

"He was a great reader: a student.

And he tried so hard to make me read too—he wanted to share everything with me. And I *did* like poetry—some poetry —when he read it aloud to me. After his death I thought: 'There'll be his books. I can go back to them—I shall find him there.' And I tried—oh, so hard —but it's no use. They've lost their meaning . . . as most things have." She stood up, lit a cigarette, pushed back a log on the hearth. I felt that she was waiting for me to speak. If life had but taught me how to answer her, what was there of her story I might not have learned? But I was too inexperienced; I could not shake off my bewilderment. What! This woman whom I had been pitying for matrimonial miseries which seemed to justify her seeking solace elsewhere—this woman could speak of her husband in such a tone! I had instantly

perceived that the tone was not feigned; and a confused sense of the complexity—or the chaos—of human relations held me as tongue-tied as a schoolboy to whom a problem beyond his grasp is suddenly propounded.

Before the thought took shape she had read it, and with the smile which drew such sad lines about her mouth, had continued gaily: "What are you up to this evening, by the way? What do you say to going to the "Black Crook" with your cousin Hubert and one or two others? I have a box."

It was inevitable that, not long after this candid confession, I should have persuaded myself that a taste for reading was boring in a woman, and that one of Mrs. Hazeldean's chief charms lay in her freedom from literary pretensions. The truth was, of course, that it lay in her sin-

cerity; in her humble yet fearless estimate of her own qualities and short-comings. I had never met its like in a woman of any age, and coming to me in such early days, and clothed in such looks and intonations, it saved me, in after years, from all peril of meaner beauties.

But before I had come to understand that, or to guess what falling in love with Lizzie Hazeldean was to do for me, I had quite unwittingly and fatuously done the falling. The affair turned out, in the perspective of the years, to be but an incident of our long friendship; and if I touch on it here it is only to illustrate another of my poor friend's gifts. If she could not read books she could read hearts; and she bent a playful yet compassionate gaze on mine while it still floundered in unawareness.

I remember it all as if it were yester-

day. We were sitting alone in her drawing-room, in the winter twilight, over the fire. We had reached—in her company it was not difficult—the degree of fellowship when friendly talk lapses naturally into a friendlier silence, and she had taken up the evening paper while I glowered dumbly at the embers. One little foot, just emerging below her dress, swung, I remember, between me and the fire, and seemed to hold her all in the spring of its instep. . .

"Oh," she exclaimed, "poor Henry Prest—". She dropped the paper. "His wife is dead—poor fellow," she said simply.

The blood rushed to my forehead: my heart was in my throat. She had named him—named him at last, the recreant lover, the man who had "dishonoured" her! My hands were clenched: if he had

entered the room they would have been at his throat. . .

And then, after a quick interval, I had again the humiliating disheartening sense of not understanding: of being too young, too inexperienced, to know. This woman, who spoke of her deceived husband with tenderness, spoke compassionately of her faithless lover! And she did the one as naturally as the other, not as if this impartial charity were an attitude she had determined to assume, but as if it were part of the lesson life had taught her.

"I didn't know he was married," I growled between my teeth.

She meditated absently. "Married? Oh, yes; when was it? The year after . . ." her voice dropped again . . . "after my husband died. He married a quiet cousin, who had always been in love with him, I believe. They had two boys.—

You knew him?" she abruptly questioned.

I nodded grimly.

"People always thought he would never marry—he used to say so himself," she went on, still absently.

I burst out: "The—hound!"

"Oh!" she exclaimed. I started up, our eyes met, and hers filled with tears of reproach and understanding. We sat looking at each other in silence. Two of the tears overflowed, hung on her lashes, melted down her cheeks. I continued to stare at her shamefacedly; then I got to my feet, drew out my handkerchief, and tremblingly, reverently, as if I had touched a sacred image, I wiped them away.

My love-making went no farther. In another moment she had contrived to put a safe distance between us. She did not want to turn a boy's head; long since (she

told me afterward) such amusements had ceased to excite her. But she did want my sympathy, wanted it overwhelmingly: amid the various feelings she was aware of arousing, she let me see that sympathy, in the sense of a moved understanding, had always been lacking. "But then," she added ingenuously, "I've never really been sure, because I've never told anyone my story. Only I take it for granted that, if I haven't, it's *their* fault rather than mine. . ." She smiled half-deprecatingly, and my bosom swelled, acknowledging the distinction. "And now I want to tell *you*—" she began.

I have said that my love for Mrs. Hazeldean was a brief episode in our long relation. At my age, it was inevitable that it should be so. The "fresher face" soon came, and in its light I saw my old friend as a middle-aged woman, turning

grey, with a mechanical smile and haunted eyes. But it was in the first glow of my feeling that she had told me her story; and when the glow subsided, and in the afternoon light of a long intimacy I judged and tested her statements, I found that each detail fitted into the earlier picture.

My opportunities were many; for once she had told the tale she always wanted to be retelling it. A perpetual longing to relive the past, a perpetual need to explain and justify herself—the satisfaction of these two cravings, once she had permitted herself to indulge them, became the luxury of her empty life. She had kept it empty—emotionally, sentimentally empty—from the day of her husband's death, as the guardian of an abandoned temple might go on forever sweeping and tending what had once been the god's

abode. But this duty performed, she had no other. She had done one great—or abominable—thing; rank it as you please, it had been done heroically. But there was nothing in her to keep her at that height. Her tastes, her interests, her conceivable occupations, were all on the level of a middling domesticity; she did not know how to create for herself any inner life in keeping with that one unprecedented impulse.

Soon after her husband's death, one of her cousins, the Miss Cecilia Winter of Washington Square to whom my mother had referred, had died also, and left Mrs. Hazeldean a handsome legacy. And a year or two later Charles Hazeldean's small estate had undergone the favourable change that befell New York realty in the 'eighties. The property he had bequeathed to his wife had doubled,

then tripled, in value; and she found herself, after a few years of widowhood, in possession of an income large enough to supply her with all the luxuries which her husband had struggled so hard to provide. It was the peculiar irony of her lot to be secured from temptation when all danger of temptation was over; for she would never, I am certain, have held out the tip of her finger to any man to obtain such luxuries for her own enjoyment. But if she did not value her money for itself, she owed to it—and the service was perhaps greater than she was aware —the power of mitigating her solitude, and filling it with the trivial distractions without which she was less and less able to live.

She had been put into the world, apparently, to amuse men and enchant them; yet, her husband dead, her sacrifice ac-

complished, she would have preferred, I am sure, to shut herself up in a lonely monumental attitude, with thoughts and pursuits on a scale with her one great hour. But what was she to do? She had known of no way of earning money except by her graces; and now she knew no way of filling her days except with cards and chatter and theatre-going. Not one of the men who approached her passed beyond the friendly barrier she had opposed to me. Of that I was sure. She had not shut out Henry Prest in order to replace him—her face grew white at the suggestion. But what else was there to do, she asked me; what? The days had to be spent somehow; and she was incurably, disconsolately sociable.

So she lived, in a cold celibacy that passed for I don't know what licence; so she lived, withdrawn from us all, yet need-

ing us so desperately, inwardly faithful to her one high impulse, yet so incapable of attuning her daily behaviour to it! And so, at the very moment when she ceased to deserve the blame of society, she found herself cut off from it, and reduced to the status of the "fast" widow noted for her jolly suppers.

I bent bewildered over the depths of her plight. What else, at any stage of her career, could she have done, I often wondered? Among the young women now growing up about me I find none with enough imagination to picture the helpless incapacity of the pretty girl of the 'seventies, the girl without money or vocation, seemingly put into the world only to please, and unlearned in any way of maintaining herself there by her own efforts. Marriage alone could save such a girl from starvation, unless she hap-

pened to run across an old lady who wanted her dogs exercised and her *Churchman* read aloud to her. Even the day of painting wild-roses on fans, of colouring photographs to "look like" miniatures, of manufacturing lamp-shades and trimming hats for more fortunate friends—even this precarious beginning of feminine independence had not dawned. It was inconceivable to my mother's generation that a portionless girl should not be provided for by her relations until she found a husband; and that, having found him, she should have to help him to earn a living, was more inconceivable still. The self-sufficing little society of that vanished New York attached no great importance to wealth, but regarded poverty as so distasteful that it simply took no account of it.

These things pleaded in favour of poor

Lizzie Hazeldean, though to superficial observers her daily life seemed to belie the plea. She had known no way of smoothing her husband's last years but by being false to him; but once he was dead, she expiated her betrayal by a rigidity of conduct for which she asked no reward but her own inner satisfaction. As she grew older, and her friends scattered, married, or were kept away from one cause or another, she filled her depleted circle with a less fastidious hand. One met in her drawing-room dull men, common men, men who too obviously came there because they were not invited elsewhere, and hoped to use her as a social stepping-stone. She was aware of the difference—her eyes said so whenever I found one of these newcomers installed in my arm-chair—but never, by word or sign, did she admit it. She said to me once: "You find it duller

here than it used to be. It's my fault, perhaps; I think I knew better how to draw out my old friends." And another day: "Remember, the people you meet here now come out of kindness. I'm an old woman, and I consider nothing else." That was all.

She went more assiduously than ever to the theatre and the opera; she performed for her friends a hundred trivial services; in her eagerness to be always busy she invented superfluous attentions, oppressed people by offering assistance they did not need, verged at times—for all her tact—on the officiousness of the desperately lonely. At her little suppers she surprised us with exquisite flowers and novel delicacies. The champagne and cigars grew better and better as the quality of the guests declined; and sometimes, as the last of her dull company dispersed,

I used to see her, among the scattered ash-trays and liqueur decanters, turn a stealthy glance at her reflection in the mirror, with haggard eyes which seemed to ask: "Will even *these* come back to-morrow?"

I should be loth to leave the picture at this point; my last vision of her is more satisfying. I had been away, travelling for a year at the other end of the world; the day I came back I ran across Hubert Wesson at my club. Hubert had grown pompous and heavy. He drew me into a corner, and said, turning red, and glancing cautiously over his shoulder: "Have you seen our old friend Mrs. Hazeldean? She's very ill, I hear."

I was about to take up the "I hear"; then I remembered that in my absence Hubert had married, and that his caution was probably a tribute to his new state.

I hurried at once to Mrs. Hazeldean's; and on her door-step, to my surprise, I ran against a Catholic priest, who looked gravely at me, bowed and passed out.

I was unprepared for such an encounter, for my old friend had never spoken to me of religious matters. The spectacle of her father's career had presumably shaken whatever incipient faith was in her; though in her little-girlhood, as she often told me, she had been as deeply impressed by Dr. Winter's eloquence as any grown-up member of his flock. But now, as soon as I laid eyes on her, I understood. She was very ill, she was visibly dying; and in her extremity, fate, not always kind, had sent her the solace which she needed. Had some obscure inheritance of religious feeling awaked in her? Had she remembered that her poor father, after his long life of mental and moral

vagabondage, had finally found rest in the ancient fold? I never knew the explanation—she probably never knew it herself.

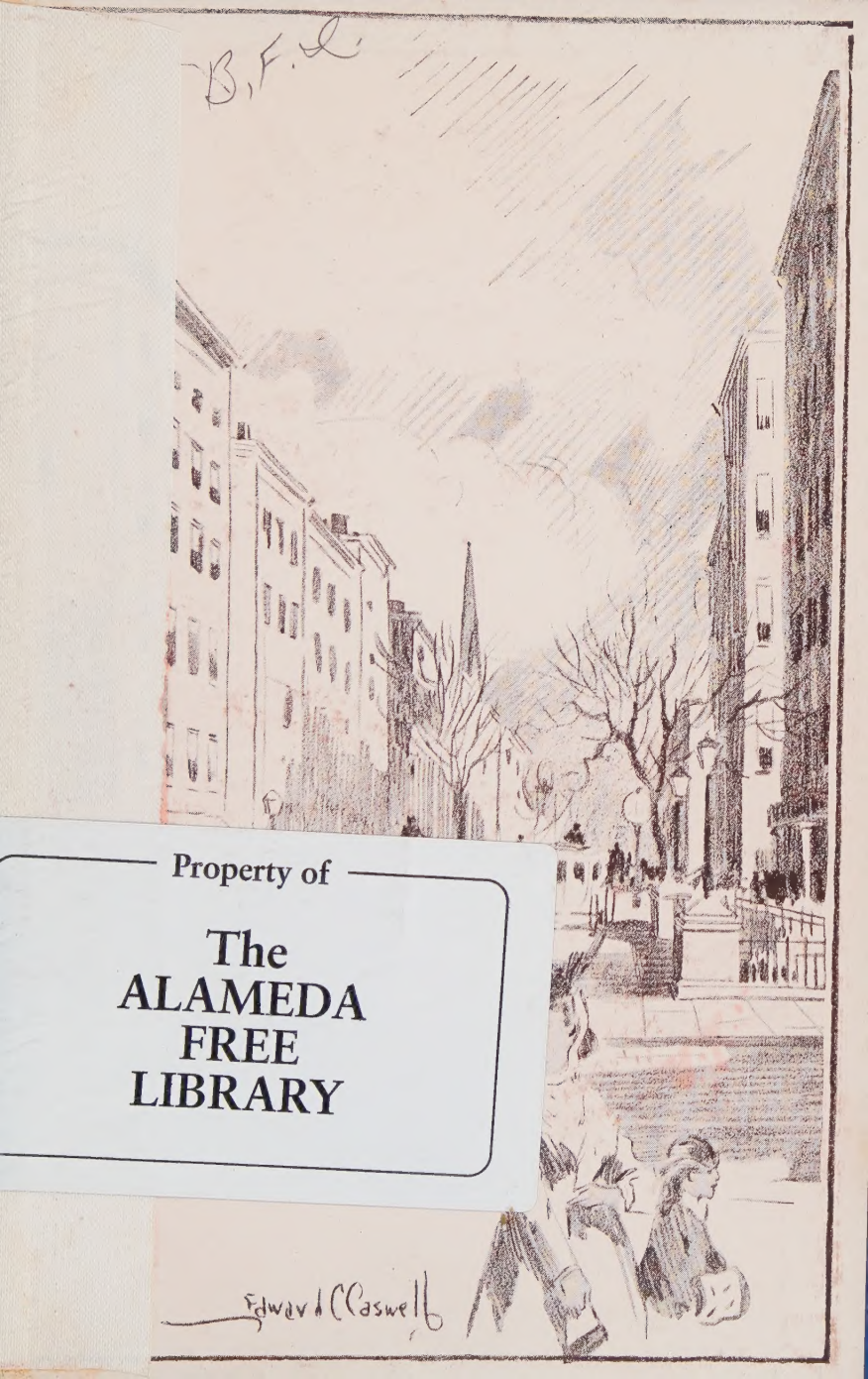
But she knew that she had found what she wanted. At last she could talk of Charles, she could confess her sin, she could be absolved of it. Since cards and suppers and chatter were over, what more blessed barrier could she find against solitude? All her life, henceforth, was a long preparation for that daily hour of expansion and consolation. And then this merciful visitor, who understood her so well, could also tell her things about Charles: knew where he was, how he felt, what exquisite daily attentions could still be paid to him, and how, with all unworthiness washed away, she might at last hope to reach him. Heaven could never seem strange, so interpreted; each time that I

saw her, during the weeks of her slow fading, she was more and more like a traveller with her face turned homeward, yet smilingly resigned to await her summons. The house no longer seemed lonely, nor the hours tedious; there had even been found for her, among the books she had so often tried to read, those books which had long looked at her with such hostile faces, two or three (they were always on her bed) containing messages from the world where Charles was waiting.

Thus provided and led, one day she went to him.

(1)

THE END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